

ISAAC SHARPLESS

1848-1920.

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It is fitting that we should record our great sense of loss in the recent death of Isaac Sharpless, LL.D., late President of Haverford College, who was in fact the founder of the Friends' Historical Society and its first President. To him more than to any other we owe the organization of this body, which was the outcome of the Centennial celebration at Friends' Meeting House at Fourth and Arch Streets, Philadelphia, in the summer of 1904.

On that remarkable occasion, before an audience of twenty-three hundred, Isaac Sharpless, in his own inimitable way, reviewed the social conditions among Philadelphia Friends a century before. When the souvenir book of the Centennial was published soon after, his Introduction, which was also the first official publication of this Society, contained the following striking paragraph: "It is well occasionally to look into the past, and gather up the standards and principles of our ancestors in the faith. It is well if it lead us to reconsecrate ourselves to the cause for which they wrought—the pure religion of Christ. We may not adopt all their methods; the testimonies which they upheld may in part be replaced by others more vital to our day. But those among us who see beneath the surface will feel no disposition to build on any other groundwork than theirs, nor to adopt modes of action essentially out of harmony with their principles. The lack of historic background, while compatible with much Christian goodness and zeal and openness of mind, seems, when applied to congregations, to lead to opportunism; the selection of methods dictated by the emergencies of the present, and to destroy that continuity of principle so essential to the preservation of the type. If the spirit and motives of the best Friends of the past were known and read by all of us who bear the name of Friend, they would be interwoven through our lives as through the pages of prophecy is interwoven, 'thus saith the Lord.'" With this most characteristic setting forth of the principles which he felt should guide the future acts of this Historical Society, we

may pause for a moment's backward glance at the career of this Quaker historian.

Isaac Sharpless, son of Aaron and Susanna (Forsythe) Sharpless, was born December 16th, 1848. A ponderous quarto tome of over 1300 pages, published in 1887, preserves the record of the immigrant ancestor John Sharpless and the thousands of his substantial progeny in the community in which Isaac Sharpless was a birthright Friend. The farm of his father and grandfather Isaac Sharpless, where he was born, had been the homestead of the family for several generations. It lay at the foot of Osborne Hill among the gently undulating hills of East Bradford, now (since 1856) Birmingham Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. The impressionable years of boyhood were spent here, where his daily walks took him over the historic battlefield of the Brandywine, and where the semi-weekly worship of the family led a little southeasterly to Birmingham Friends' Meeting House (Orthodox)—the old Meeting House of the "Hicksite" body near by having served as the hospital on the battle ground.

He was a diligent reader of the choice collection of books in the old Birmingham Library, supported by members of that meeting and others. From this little library fiction was carefully excluded but its absence was filled by a double portion of biography, history, travel and popular science. From childhood he had listened to Revolutionary tales of the neighborhood and had seen the graves of the British and American soldiers in the burial ground at the old Meeting House. Doubtless these early influences told upon his career, which began among the historic surroundings in which he grew up, but it was his home training that had more to do in making him what he was than the historic features of the country. His first school was that conducted by Friends near the Meeting House.

From Birmingham Isaac Sharpless went to Westtown School in November, 1862, where, after completing its course of study, he returned to teach mathematics in 1868, and where the next autumn, his parents came and resided for five years as Superintendent and Matron. With the exception of one year—1872-3—spent at Harvard, where he obtained the degree of Bachelor of



Science in the Lawrence Scientific School, Isaac Sharpless remained at Westtown. In the autumn of 1875 he was appointed Instructor of Mathematics at Haverford College, where he spent the remainder of his useful life. In 1876 (August 10th) he married Lydia Trimble Cope, daughter of Paschal and Amy A. Cope of West Chester, Pennsylvania. She survives him, with one son and five daughters.

In 1879 Isaac Sharpless was made Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy, in which capacity he served until 1884. Readers of Philadelphia periodicals will recall the able articles, on the aspect of the heavens at different periods, which constantly appeared over his signature during those years, and which, together with the reports from the Haverford Observatory, made its service known throughout the academic world, both here and in Europe.

For three years he served as Dean of the College, when he was elected President in 1887. His Honorary Degrees were, 1883, Sc.D. from the University of Pennsylvania; 1889, LL.D. from Swarthmore College; 1903, L.H.D. from Hobart College; 1915, LL.D. from Harvard.

His first literary efforts are to be found in the bound MS. volumes of "The Cabinet," a monthly periodical supported by the teachers and older students of Westtown. His contributions "always possessed a virility which distinguished them from others." A contemporary says of him: "The slow progress of educational matters in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting rested strongly upon his mind." The autumn of 1880 witnessed the advent of "The Student," a modest little monthly magazine "devoted to the interests of education in the Society of Friends." The editors and publishers were Isaac Sharpless and Watson W. Dewees, and it is a striking fact that "it was the first venture of the kind in the history of American Quakerism." Its management changed at the end of four years, but during that period there were several signed articles which were characteristic, besides his editorials. Any attempt to write the history of education in the Society of Friends must take into account the conspicuous part played by Isaac Sharpless in Philadelphia in the early 80's of the last cen-

ture. When the "Westonian" appeared in 1895 it had his unqualified support, and his contributions are to be found in the appended bibliography.

Isaac Sharpless' best monument is the college into which entered his whole personality. Here for thirty years he remained, much beloved and universally respected; a virile figure, with something of the old time simplicity which left its impress on every student who sat under him. It was his custom throughout to keep in personal touch with every class entering college by teaching two of their courses himself. He has unconsciously given us a true picture of himself in his book, "The American College," in which he describes the ideal college President:

" . . . He is not primarily a taskmaster or disciplinarian, but a man who is giving his life for a cause, and not only for an abstract cause, but for (men) as individuals; that he has a message for them which he must deliver, and that he feels that the very future of one or more of them lies in the proper use of that power. When he feels thus, he will preach, and his sermon will not be forgotten by some of them."

Not only was he serious in his ideals; he was full of the humor which one finds in a Lincoln. When applauded for a long time at the Haverford Alumni Dinner of 1918, he said: "I clearly understand that the most popular thing I ever did as President of Haverford was to resign." He often told the story, repeated by Dean Briggs in one of his books, about his conversation with a certain college culprit: I.S.: "I have reason to believe that thee is both a thief and a liar!" Answer: "President Sharpless, I may be a liar, but I give you my word I'm not a thief!" It was this ability to loosen a tight situation, to use the solvent of a telling epigram, that contributed markedly to his great and lasting influence.

Isaac Sharpless's pedagogic inclinations, and perhaps his humor may have come from his greatgrandfather, John Forsythe (1754-1840), a sandy-haired, gay young Presbyterian from Ireland who later joined Friends and became noted as a teacher at Birmingham and at Westtown.

In addition to his Presidency, 1904-1911, of Friends' Historical



Society of Philadelphia, he was active in other historical work, serving as Executive Councillor, 1905-1916, and President, 1909-1912, of the Pennsylvania History Club; Vice President, 1914-1915, and President, 1915-1916, of Friends' Historical Society of England; member of the Committee of Seven Advisers to the Works of William Penn, 1910-1920, and Councillor, 1910-1920, of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. His books quickly gained for him high repute for insight into human motives, sympathetic yet unbiased interpretation of Quaker policies, scientific care in the weighing of evidence, and a corresponding moderation in the statement of conclusions. Thus his was a foremost place among the historians of Pennsylvania.

An equally high ideal was held up to all who followed Isaac Sharpless in his work for clean politics, since his interests were sufficiently wide to impress the reader of his record with his accomplishments in the quiet life which sought no lime-light outside the circle of his duty. His personality, for this very reason, extended his efforts for the realization of his ideals to his college, his neighborhood and his country. The mind of the man was strictly accountable to a sensitive conscience. Duty and not expediency always determined his course, and the history of Quakerism and of his State will be the poorer for his loss. Though he had been appointed as one of the Commission, upon the revision of the Constitution of Pennsylvania, the condition of his health did not permit him to serve. His death occurred at his home at Haverford, January 16th, 1920, interment being made at Haverford Friends' Meeting House.

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